

“#Goals”: Examining a Subgenre of Social Media

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In this article, Melanie Holden takes a deeper look at #goals, a subgenre of social media that has captivated young adults. Through cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT), she examines what she sees as the problematic way that our culture partakes in this trend.

I’m going to start this article off with a not-so shocking but somewhat embarrassing confession. I am completely addicted to all kinds of social media. As a girl in college, I think that my fascination is a typical one; seemingly everyone spends time plugged into their social media outlet of choice on a daily basis. I don’t believe I have an actual problem with limiting my time spent online, but my roommates, friends, and family members are convinced that I am wasting my entire life hiding behind the dimly lit screen of my iPhone.

To be completely honest, I never thought in-depth about the effects social media has until I decided to look at it through a writing researcher lens. I was already largely aware that our generation is in love with content, refreshing news feeds, and knowing exactly what Kim Kardashian is doing at this very moment. A study recently done by the Kaiser Family Foundation shows that “today’s teens spend more than seven-and-a-half hours a day consuming media—watching TV, listening to music, surfing the Web, social networking, and playing video games, according to a 2010 study of eight- to eighteen-year olds” (Ahuja). I’m not sure that I spend up to seven hours on social media sites daily, but this statistic does not surprise me. What did surprise me was what I found when I decided to analyze a specific trend in social media that is commonly known as “#goals.”

“#Goals”

If you have an account on Twitter or Instagram, you have most definitely seen an influx of “#goals” postings. If you do not consider yourself a social media guru, let me break this subgenre down for you. As a generation, we have become rather obsessed with posting pictures that make us look desirable, and we try to convince people through these posts that we are perfect in every imaginable way. The idea behind “#goals” captures this idea perfectly. As an active member of the social media community, I thought this was just a trend, but when I examined it as a writing researcher, I became concerned about the implications that this has on me as well as my peers. I recently stumbled upon an Instagram post that my longtime friend had put on the site about her fitness progress since she began working out. Underneath the picture were comments from three different people that only said “#goals.” I began to wonder what this hashtag meant. Others had posted “#goals” on things that I had posted before, and I took it as a compliment without any further investigation. The first time I analyzed the idea of “#goals” through CHAT (cultural-historical activity theory) analysis, I became largely aware that our reception and socialization of sites like Instagram had led my peers and me to believe that we should model our goals on what we see online.

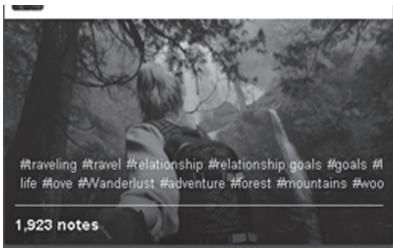


Figure 1: An example of “#relationshipgoals” picture posted to Instagram.



Figures 2 and 3: Examples of “#goals” posted on Twitter. Figure 2 captures “#breakfastgoals” while Figure 3 gives an example of “#workoutgoals.”

Figures 1, 2, and 3 give us examples of teenagers posting pictures which, in reality, show a very small glimpse of their lives, but these pictures show an attempt to make others want to be like them. The teens who post these pictures use #relationshipgoals (see Figure 1) in an effort to make their peers want to have a relationship like theirs, and this is repeated with #workoutgoals (see Figure 3) and even things as arbitrary as #breakfastgoals (see Figure 2). Whether they are meant to or not, these hashtags send the message that unless you have a relationship like mine, or look like me, or eat like me, you are not as desirable. Most importantly, this adversely affects other teens as it

gives them the false idea that they should try to embody exactly what they see online and make that their actual goal. As strange as this idea may seem, we can look at things like “#goals” as a sort of subgenre of social media. If we examine this trending topic under the lens of CHAT analysis, it just may help us get a better grasp on the topic.

Social Media Culture

We know that CHAT asks us to analyze the culture in which a text was created. In case you were wondering why today’s teenagers spend their free time plugged into the Internet obsessing about being just like their peers and then calling it reaching their “goals,” we need not look any further than culture. It is no secret that social media has inundated our world over the past few years. As I already stated, this trend is even more popular amongst teenagers. Recent stats correlated by the Pew Internet and American Life Project, along with Harvard’s Berkman Center, show that “Ninety-five percent of teens aged twelve–seventeen use the Internet, and eighty-one percent of them use social networks” (Kaiser) With staggering numbers like this, it is easy to recognize that the fad of social media is generated at large by our culture’s fascination by it.

Social media is completely fueled by our empowerment of these sites. With so many teens plugged in for elongated periods of time, we see the rise of the social media genre: blogs, Instagram pictures, tweets, pins, and the list goes on. With increased awareness of these mediums that display our lives in a seemingly picture-perfect setting, we see our culture participating in the social media subgenre. This is where “#goals” comes into play. It may seem ridiculous to some to analyze something as trivial as the text of subgenres in social media, but I think that the hashtag has a lot to say about our culture and what interests us. I admit that I am guilty of sitting behind my phone and editing a picture and then holding my breath once I hit “post” in hopes of receiving the maximum amount of likes. It may seem silly and schoolgirlish, but our culture, for the most part (at this point in time), embraces the idea that our lives should be public for others to see as well as to judge. We want people to think highly of us and “like” our pictures, which gives us the notion that we are liked. To put it simply, the culture that millennials have embraced has become largely accustomed to the “like” lifestyle.

The History of the

To gain a better understanding of how our culture became so fascinated with social media, it is important to see how things like the # became a symbol that has been so widely adopted into our language. The background and future of

something like social media is different than any medium of genre we have seen before in a multitude of ways. The most obvious of these reasons is that with the capability the Internet gives us, we have endless potential to get anything published immediately for a large group of people to have continuous access to. The hashtag has been a big part of this. When you hashtag something on most social media sites, including Twitter and Instagram, you are able to see every post that incorporates that hashtag. This (the hashtag) has become one of the most recognized subgenres of social media, but where did it come from? It would be so strange to scroll through my Twitter feed today without seeing a hashtag, but if I would have used a hashtag on social media a few years ago, people would have no clue what I was trying to do. This subgenre has quickly inundated everything from national news to Instagram pictures.

According to BusinessInsider.com, the hashtag was first used on Twitter in 2007 by a former Google designer. He intended it as a means to help group specific things together. From that point on, we began to see social media sites adopt the idea, and slowly it made itself evident through all forms of media. Today it is used in various contexts throughout Twitter and Instagram. Anything important happening in the world is most likely trending on Twitter because of a hashtag that is associated with it. It is easy to see why we should be concerned with the genre of hashtags in social media because they are *literally* everywhere. This also elicits the main reason why it is important to concern ourselves with subgenres of the hashtag like “goals.” As consumers of content we can see that our culture places value on the hashtag. When we are presented with things like “#goals,” it sends the message that we should be concerned with this idea as well.

The Activity of “#goals”

When we spend time plugged into our network of choice, we are participating in an activity system. Social media now plays a huge role in our culture, and this, coupled with the history of networking, allows us to experiment with getting our thoughts in the open for other people to see. Both of these elements (social media and the idea of networking) relate strongly to us taking action in the social networking community. Once we become active in the culture and history that these sites create, we become adept at participating in the genres and subgenres of the sites that we choose to be active on. Teenagers especially seem to succumb to the latest crazes of social networking. This is made evident through teens’ use of things like “#goals.” The idea behind this subgenre of our favorite networks is to look at someone, or what they are doing, and then actively decide that you want to be just like them; by doing so, you somehow reach your arbitrary goal of eating as cool of a breakfast

or having as nice of abs as someone else. In order to have these “goals”, we must first log in and become active in the social networking community itself.

Applying CHAT to “#goals”

When researching through the lens of CHAT, we are asked to consider the various components of this theory. This means that we must investigate a genre in many different ways, including through an analysis of the text’s representation, distribution, socialization, and reception. Using these terms to consider “#goals” allows me to see that **representation** deals with the way that we are trying to represent ourselves through what we post online. **Distribution** refers to the methods that I use to distribute my posts, including the specific tools and platforms of social media that allow others to see my posts. **Socialization** investigates how others interact with what I post, which, in this case, means whether they like, share, retweet it, etc. The **reception** of a social media post indicates how the message itself is received by others as well as their reaction to it.

When it comes to “#goals,” what we post online is supposed to represent who we are and what we are thinking. We may be flattered when someone comments “#goals” because it means that they want to present themselves the same way that we have. This is a central motive behind “#goals”: the person who posts does so because they hope it represents them positively. The issue of distribution takes this to a whole other level. The distribution of posts and content on the Internet is virtually limitless. Social media has created a level of permanence to the ideas that we choose to display. If we post a picture, status update, blog, etc., it is nearly impossible to know that the artifact has ever been removed even if we choose to delete it. Furthermore, we have a very limited idea of how many people have actually seen a post or who those people actually are.

Our resources (as consumers of content) allow us to screenshot, save, and share whatever someone else has posted. If one person saves a picture that you post before you delete it off your social media page, their ability to plaster that image all over the Internet is virtually limitless. This idea is a key component of what makes the trajectory of social media so complicated. The vastness of the Internet has given the genre of social media texts and subtexts a much different level of distribution. Content that was once limited to newspapers and books is now literally at the tip of your fingers 24/7 and is distributed to limitless amounts of people. This means that when a person is positively represented through something that they post, it can be distributed all throughout the Web enabling vast numbers of people to have access to it.

Additionally, often someone will post something with “#goals” on it to Instagram and then share that same post to their Twitter and Facebook accounts. This allows the representation of their “goals” to be distributed through many different networks. It seems like a lot of work, but teenagers do it for the reception that they get from those who see their posts; their ultimate goal is to receive positive feedback from their followers. To breakdown a brief CHAT analysis of “#goals,” it goes a little something like this: *I want to represent how awesome I am, so I'm going to distribute this rad picture of me all over social media so that everyone tries to be just like me and I receive a bunch of comments about how great I am.* Well, maybe this isn't exactly what someone thinks before posting a picture of themselves with “#goals” on it, but when we examine this through the lens of theory, this is all that is actually accomplished.

Tying it all Together

Just in case you're still completely lost trying to understand this whole “#goals” thing, this is what I interpret it as: *I want people to see my pictures, think I'm really cool, and want to be like me. I want to be looked at as someone's “#goal.”* As arbitrary as this may sound to those of you who are not eighteen-year-old girls, our culture, and more specifically our generation, has widely adopted the idea that social media matters. We have started to believe that you should look at a post on social media and aim to copy it, so that others will want to be like you just as you want to be like them. In reality what this really adds up to is that you want others to aim to be like the person you advertise on your social media, and you want to be like the person they advertise through theirs. If you're wondering what I mean by this, take a look at the person sitting next to you right now, and then look at their profile picture on Facebook. Their picture probably looks a lot different than what they look like now, but I'm sure that on some of these photos someone has commented “#goals.” The person we portray on social media is typically not the most accurate depiction of who we really are. This means that when someone comments “#goals” on your post, they aren't even really trying to be like you, but the person you are trying to portray on Facebook.

As an admitted social media nerd, I have definitely taken an active role in these subgenres of social media, and this revelation was a lot for me to take in. In the past, I have found it to be a huge compliment when someone comments on a picture or status update of mine that what I was doing was their “#goal.” When I began to look at this idea behind the lens of genre and CHAT analysis, I realized just how arbitrary it all was. I spend time daily on social media sites for a number of reasons, mostly because they are addicting, but also because I think that they have something to teach us.

Social networking has the ability to do truly wonderful things. From keeping in contact with distant relatives to learning about breaking news from your Facebook feed, social media allows us to become more aware of the world around us in a much quicker manner than we have ever seen before.

As a college student (and through this writing research project), I have also become well aware of the negative side of spending much of your day plugged in. I will still look to social media daily to see the latest celebrity gossip and to check up on my friends and family, but I probably won't let social media decide what my goals are anymore. Don't get me wrong, I'm not ditching the idea of goals, but I am ditching “#goals.” I've learned that what I want to do, or the person I aim to become, should be genuine aspirations that come from me and not my Twitter feed. I guarantee that the person I am on Facebook is not the truest version of me, and the same goes with most of all the other users of social media. Next time you find yourself wanting to comment “#goals,” just remember that there are much bigger goals to reach for than what this particular subgenre has in store for us.

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